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Seán Bán Mac Grianna and ‘Christine Keeler’

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ABSTRACT

No abstract.

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The locally-based poet who composes on traditional themes is, or was, a fairly widespread phenomenon in Gaelic communities on both sides of *Sruth na Maoile*. In Scotland such a poet is often called a *bàrd baile*. Although some women made songs in this tradition (Neat & MacInnes 1999), these poets were mostly male, like their Irish counterparts. These poets made songs that encompassed a wide range of topics, some intimately local, others dealing with more prominent national or international events. In Ireland, by 1993, in excess of a hundred songs had been made in the Connemara Gaeltacht by over forty poets (Ó Conghaile 1993: 7–10), and the tide of song shows no sign of ebbing. Themes could include ‘homeland, war, love, local and national events, new technology, religion, philosophy, humour and songs relating to individual members of the community’ (Kidd 2006: 174). Despite this range, however, ‘poetry derived from the verse tradition of the past’ (*ibid.*) has often been considered narrow in scope and limited by traditional conventions. Such views were advanced by those wishing to access more contemporary, up-to-date and modern genres as found in English and other languages more influenced by print culture (MacAulay 1976: 46). The term *bàrd baile* is problematic, as it suggests that such poets’ views of the world are confined, limited and consequently inferior. This lack of respect has been attributed to the ‘tradition-innovation wars of the 1960s’ (Black 1999: lxi).

Recent research, however, has led to a new appreciation of the work of local poets (e.g. McKean 1997). The elegies composed by John Morrison of Scalpaigh, Harris, for example, have been described as the literary equivalent of a ‘renaissance cathedral’ (Black: lxi). The mock-heroic vein, which is strong and well-developed in both Scottish Gaelic and Irish song poetry, can be traced at least to the eighteenth century in Irish Gaelic verse, and is related to the poets’ loss of status in that period (Ó Laoire 2009). In this paper, I will discuss a song in this style by a twentieth-century Donegal poet, much of whose work is still popular. However, for reasons that will become clear, the particular song in question has not previously been published. It reveals many of the best characteristics of topical song poetry in Irish, and underlines the close connections between the two related traditions.

Seán Bán Mac Grianna (1905–1979) was the youngest surviving child of Feilimí Dhónaill Phroinnsias Mac Grianna and Máire Sheimisín Ní Dhomhnaill of Rann na Feirste, Co. Donegal. Both parents were noted tradition-bearers in a Gaeltacht area renowned for the richness of its oral traditions. Seán Bán had ten siblings, two of whom, Séamus (1889–1968) and Seosamh (1901–1991), achieved lasting fame as writers in the twentieth-century efflorescence of Gaelic writing in Ireland. Both he and his sister, who was known as Annie Bhán (1893–1963), were recognized as skilled storytellers.¹ Seán Bán was also a singer and fiddle-player (Mac Grianna & Mac Corraidh 2010), but his most outstanding achievement was as a *file* – a song-maker, akin to the *bàrd bhaile* of Gaelic Scotland.

Mac Grianna’s song ‘Christine Keeler’ shows how a rural Irish-language poet living far from London was able to engage with contemporary events of considerable sophistication, and do so in a sharp, intelligent and comedic manner. The song is firmly rooted in a present where the scandal is

¹ ‘MAC GRIANNA, Seán Bán (1905–1979)’. *Ainm.ie: Beathaisnéisí Gaeilge* (<http://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=448>). Consulted on 27 December 2012. *Ainm.ie* also contains biographies of Seán Bán’s siblings Annie Bhán, Séamus (1889–1968), Domhnall (1894–1962) and Seosamh (1901–1991). See also MacLennan and Harrison 1997.

still a recent happening. It demonstrates the poet’s awareness of the Cold War and its influence on the unfolding of events. As was common in Gaelic poetry, the song borrows an air and some lyrics from another song. The borrowing is not a matter of chance, however, and reveals the clever deployment and extension of references in the source to emphasize and augment the points the poet wishes to make in his own work.

Ióseph Ó Searcaigh, a school teacher from Anagaire, Co. Donegal, collected twenty of Mac Grianna’s songs, including two translations of English language songs, and published them in a little book, *Seághan Bán Mac Grianna: Ceoltaí agus Seanchas*, which appeared in 1976 in connection with the Golden Jubilee celebrations surrounding the founding of Coláiste Bhríde, the local Gaelic College in Rann na Feirste, Co. Donegal, where Mac Grianna taught for nearly fifty years. Mac Grianna’s online biography is probably correct in observing of his poetry, *tá cuid mhór nach raibh i gcló riamh* ‘there is much that has never been published’.² Like many oral poets, Mac Grianna did not function in a milieu where publishing was the norm, and unsurprisingly many of his songs have, over time, been lost.

Censored or Private Songs

The well-established idea that songs must be taken up by a community in order to ensure dissemination and survival will always hold true. What is not often considered is how songs that are taboo are transmitted and performed. Kenneth Goldstein researched sectarian songs in religiously-mixed communities in Newfoundland, where he discovered that such songs were sung only in private, and when members from the group being criticised in the song were not present. Goldstein encountered reluctance on the part of his informants to perform them for him, prevailing upon them only after some persuasion (Goldstein 1991). Elsewhere my co-writer Sean Williams and I have shown that a similar dynamic obtained in the case of ‘Johnny Seoighe’, a song from Carna, Co. Galway, and we have suggested why these restrictions operated in relation to that song (Williams and Ó Laoire, 2011, 71–88). In a Scottish context, one might also mention the incendiary potential attached to the singing of the waulking song ‘*Cha déid Mór a Bharraidh Bhrònaich*’ in Cape Breton communities of Barra and Uist descent, where performance of this item ‘could start a fight’, and was consequently forbidden at social gatherings (Campbell and Collinson 1977: 112–120; 226–232). Peadar Ó Ceannabháin has remarked on similar conventions among song poets in Conamara. Speaking of some songs he states (Ó Ceannabháin 164):

Cé gur amhráin phobail a thugtar orthu ba mhinic gur ar chuid bheag den phobal a bhídís dírithe agus ar phobal beag éisteachta. Is iomaí amhrán a cumadh agus a casadh nár chuala ach dream áirithe, dhá theach nó beagán lena chois ar aon bhaile, b’fhéidir. Amanta, ní bheadh an dream a chum iad ag iarraidh go gcloisfí iad ná go gcasfaí go poiblí iad.’

Although they are called community songs, they were often meant for a very small part of the community and for a small audience. Many songs were made and sung that only certain people heard, perhaps [the inhabitants of] two houses or a little more than that in one township. Sometimes, those who made them did not want them to be heard or to be sung publicly.

Proinsias Ó Maonaigh, the well known Donegal fiddler (1922–2006), first told me about Mac Grianna’s ‘Christine Keeler,’ a song which falls into this category.³ Christine Keeler was the young woman at the centre of the infamous Profumo Affair, which rocked British political life when the

² Mac Grianna, Seán. Ainm.ie.

³ Ó Maonaigh, Proinsias. Ainm.ie <http://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=1916>. Consulted 3 July 2013.

story broke in 1963. Given its theme, Ióseph Ó Searcaigh and those involved in the organisation of the Golden Jubilee activities may have decided that the song was unsuitable for inclusion in the 1976 volume. I had often asked about this song, and many people told me they knew of it, but I was unable to get the words until September 2012. I had asked my colleague Micheál Ó Domhnaill, himself of Rann na Feirste stock, a son of the late and well-known singer Caitlín Ní Dhomhnaill (1940–2005), if he had heard of it. He had not, but he enquired and finally managed to procure the text from Tony Mac Ruairí, a Rann na Feirste native who has researched Seán Bán Mac Grianna's songs. Here is the note Micheál attached to the lyrics:

Seo leagan den amhrán 'Christine Keeler' a fuair mé ó Tony Mac Ruairí an lá faoi dheireadh. Deir sé liom go bhfuair sé ó Pádraig Chonaill Mac Grianna é. Chuir mé ceist fán amhrán i dtrátha an ama adaí ar cheistigh tú mé féin faoi, ach ní raibh a fhios ag aon duine a dhath faoi – tháinig sé seo chun solais agus faoi mo dhéin díreach ar an Luan.

Here is a version of the song 'Christine Keeler' which I got from Tony Mac Ruairí the other day. He says he got it from Pádraig Chonaill Mac Grianna. I asked about this song around that time you questioned me about it, but nobody knew anything about it – it came to light and to me only on Monday.

Clearly, the song has been remembered by some of the people in Rann na Feirste. However, like the songs mentioned above, where an element of privacy or censorship prevailed with regard to their performance, it is clear that the song has followed less than obvious modes of transmission. Because of its potential for controversy, 'Christine Keeler', like the others, seems to have been deliberately hidden, and sung only in restricted gatherings.

Since its subject matter would have been considered risqué, 'Christine Keeler' was not published with the poet's other songs, and many people remained unaware of its existence. As Micheál Ó Domhnaill's note indicates, however, the song was preserved and kept in good order, as can be seen from the version published here. This is no decaying fragment, but a full and complete version that indicates that the item has been actively and carefully retained and, presumably, enjoyed for its satirical, comedic sentiments.

Údar an amhráin – The Story behind the Song

Mac Grianna composed 'Christine Keeler' in response to a British political scandal that erupted in the early sixties. The reporting of this affaire marked a new era. Such matters could now be aired in public by a press which refused to collude with codes of reportage that had previously sheltered the lives of politicians from public scrutiny. The story itself is a convoluted and intricate one that has been the subject of a number of books. All the details need not detain us here, but a summary of the main points is required for an understanding of the song's text. Like so many Gaelic songs, it alludes to the events of the story, rather than narrating them. Consequently, the accompanying narrative becomes a focal point of the whole, and augments the often brief references made in the lyrics (Shields 1993).

In 1963, John Profumo (1915–2006) was Secretary of State for War in Harold Macmillan's Conservative Government. He was married to actress Valerie Hobson. In 1961 he was introduced to Christine Keeler (1942–) by Stephen Ward (1912–1963), an osteopath and socialite, at a party at Cliveden, the Buckinghamshire residence of Lord Astor. Profumo and Keeler had a brief affair. The following year, rumours of the relationship began to leak out, along with others linking Keeler to Yevgeny Ivanov, a senior Soviet diplomat with the Russian Embassy in London, who was strongly suspected of espionage. In 1962, the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Cold War tensions were at their height, and the story attracted considerable interest, especially from members of MI5. They became convinced that the Russians had plotted to use Keeler to procure classified information

from Profumo. In fact, Stephen Ward had been assisting MI5 in order to entrap Ivanov. Profumo initially denied any irregularity in his relationship with Keeler, but later, in June 1963, he publicly admitted having lied to the House of Commons. He resigned his cabinet position on 5 June 1963. A few months later, Prime Minister Macmillan, citing ill-health, retired from office and was replaced as leader of the Conservative Party by Sir Alec Douglas-Home. The Tories, however, continued to lose credibility with the electorate, and because of this scandal and other unfavourable circumstances they were defeated in the General Election of 1964 by Harold Wilson’s Labour Party. Charged with living off earnings from prostitution, Stephen Ward committed suicide on the last day of his trial in August 1963 (Irving 1963; Young 1963; Brown 2001).

‘Christine Keeler’ – a reading

Mac Grianna was not the only artist to be inspired by the Profumo Affair. Many other works were based on the story over the years, including the film *Scandal* (Caton-Jones, 1989). Mac Grianna’s poem portrays a first-person narrator, an anti-heroic figure who goes to London and encounters Stephen Ward in a pub. He meets people from every race there, including some from France and, tellingly, Russia. He gains access to one of Ward’s parties and, surveying all the women present, promptly falls in love with Christine Keeler. He approaches her and whispers in her ear, but she escapes instead with John Profumo. Not to be deterred, however, the narrator takes full advantage of Ward’s invitation to his apartment, and enjoys himself to the full with *spéirmhná caoine* – ‘beautiful, gentle women’. A reference to a broken mirror in verse six appears to allude to the two-way mirrors in Ward’s Wimpole Mews flat (Irving 1963: 198). The scandal spreads throughout the country and becomes the talk of the nation, and Macmillan suffers because of it. Eventually the song refers to Henry the Eighth’s fondness for women, declaring that, had he lived, the King would have had an attractive, fun-loving harem. Moreover, he would have needed no permission from clergy to elope with them into the bracken. The song finishes with the dejected narrator declaring that, notwithstanding the many beautiful, gentle women who have spent blissful nights in his company, he will remain in love with Christine Keeler even if he lives forever.

Intertextuality and its import

An interesting aspect of this song is the song’s obvious intertextual engagement with ‘*An Poc ar Buile*’, a song composed around 1940 by Múscaí (Cork) poet Dónall Ó Mulláin (1880–1965), which won a prize at the Gaelic League’s Oireachtas festival and subsequently became well-known in Gaelic circles.⁴ It was even exported by at least one priest and enjoyed immensely by his African congregation.⁵ This now iconic song gained widespread popularity through the performances of the well-known tenor, Seán Ó Sé, singing with Seán Ó Riada’s Ceoltóirí Chualann, whose 1962 recording was widely disseminated over the national airwaves.⁶ Indeed, Seán Ó Sé was nicknamed ‘the Pucker’ because of his close association with this song. The song has retained its popularity, has been frequently recorded, and remains widely known in Ireland to this day.

Mac Grianna’s choice of this air for his song was deliberate. The subject matter of ‘*An Poc ar Buile*’, which concerns a rampaging billy goat and its victims, is so inconsequential as to be considered frivolous. This charge was indeed levelled against it by a correspondent for *Comhar*,

⁴Ó MULLÁIN, Dónall (1880–1965). *Ainm.ie: Beathaisnéisí Gaeilge* (<http://www.ainm.ie/Bio.aspx?ID=537>). Consulted on 27 December 2012.

⁵ “‘An Poc ar Buile’ delights Africans, says Priest.’ *Irish Independent*, 24 September, 1963, 8. In this article the song’s composer is said to be Seán Eoghan Ó Súilleabháin, another noted Cúil Aodha poet. Neither the priest nor the location of his African congregation are named in the article.

⁶ Nicholas Carolan, Director, Irish Traditional Music Archive, personally confirmed to me the release date of this recording.

reporting on a concert held at the annual Irish cultural festival, Oireachtas na Gaeilge, in November, 1950:

*Thairis sin, sa chás so, ní ceart amhrán de shaghas ‘An Poc ar Buile’ bheith ar an chlár. An gcuirfí ‘The Dingle Puck Goat’ ar chlár Chuir Cheoil i mBéarla? Ná tuigtear go bhfuilim in éadan amhráin den tsórt, ach iad do bheith ina suíomh ceart i measc cóluadair shuairc i dteach tábhairne, an piunt ar láimh agus an béal agus an croí ar leathadh gan chosc. Ach ar stáitse fuar i mBaile Átha Cliath mara bhfuil togha na healadhn Gaeilge ar taisbeáint!*⁷

Furthermore, in this case, a song like ‘An Poc ar Buile’ should not be on the programme. Would ‘The Dingle Puck Goat’ be put on an English language Concert programme? Let it not be thought that I am opposed to songs of this kind, but that they ought to be in a proper context amongst a happy company in a public house, pints in hand and both mouth and heart open without restraint. But on a cold stage in Dublin where the best of Gaelic art is on show!

This disapproving review condemns the item as unsuitable for serious listeners. However, the very frivolity of ‘An Poc ar Buile’ was undoubtedly the source of its appeal for Mac Grianna, with the song’s national popularity acting as an additional incentive. He could easily see that the subversive qualities in his fellow poet’s song were ideally suited to his own purpose. As a result, his intertextual references are especially effective. His deliberate choice of air and use of the chorus of ‘An Poc ar Buile’ intentionally underline the irreverent, Rabelaisian humour. The reference to the goat obliquely emphasizes the sexual nature of the scandal, the goat being considered, in folklore and popular culture, an unusually lecherous animal.⁸ The poet’s reference to Henry the Eighth adds to the satire here. The King’s defection from Roman Catholicism and his fondness for illicit relationships was commonly invoked by Catholics in sectarian debates.

Mac Grianna pokes fun not only at the British establishment and their hypocritical ways, but also at the Gaelic movement. His choice of theme was hardly likely to meet the stringent cultural standards of *Comhar*’s reviewer, any more than his model did. In doing so, he destabilises official attempts to promote a monolithic image of a high-minded, serious Gaelic culture without any humorous dimension. The serious image was important for nation-building purposes, especially to counter ingrained stereotypes of fun-loving (but ultimately shiftless) Gaels in opposition with stolid Anglo-Saxons with a dependable, if humourless, work ethic. But while Mac Grianna was committed to the ideals of the movement, he also recognized the futility of attempts to control and manipulate Gaelic cultural expression in a one-sided manner. Mac Grianna’s playful but mordant satire fits well with Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque’s questioning of all authority (Bakhtin, 1984).

⁷Anonymous (‘Len Ár dTuirisceoir’ – ‘From Our Reporter’), *Comhar* 9/11 (1950): 6.

⁸See, for example, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, Book I Canto IV, where lechery is portrayed riding a goat:

*And next to him rode lustful Lechery
Upon a bearded Goat, whose rugged Hair
And whally Eyes (the sign of Jealousy)
Was like the Person self, whom he did bear:
Who rough, and black, and filthy did appear,*

This imagery ultimately derives from the last judgement in Christian tradition, where the sheep and goats are divided – the sheep being saved and the goats damned. Billy goats are considered especially obsessed with mating; see Black, Conolly and Flint (2011): 582.

Implications

The example of 'Christine Keeler' shows how a rural Irish language poet was able to engage with modern phenomena in an intelligent and unselfconscious manner. His engagement with current events reveals a keen and sophisticated observation of international politics and current affairs. The song is certainly traditional in format and style, but tradition here functions as an 'enabling referent' that enhances, rather than stifles, the creative impact of the song. The poet's access to modern mass media having enabled his engagement with the news of the day, his song is firmly rooted in a present where the event has only just occurred. Reference to the Russian in the first verse shows Mac Grianna's awareness of the Cold War and its influence on the unfolding of events, and his borrowing of air and chorus from another contemporary Gaelic poet is another stroke of brilliance entirely apposite to his theme. Certainly, the song is in character with the poet's well-known persona of '*An Banaí Drabhlásach*' – the profligate womanizer (Mac Grianna & Ó Searcaigh 1976: 61/2) – on which he based other songs. Certainly the song is traditional in its use of motifs and imagery. Nevertheless, tradition here is an enabling force, not a dead weight that limits the poet's creativity. Indeed, Mac Grianna's 'Christine Keeler' bears out the idea that oral poetry 'does not divorce entertainment from instruction, artistic craft from cultural work' (Foley 2002: 28). It therefore seems fair to conclude that, as has been argued in the Scottish Gaelic context, *bardachd bhaile* need not be characterized as narrow, nor need it be doomed to disappear.

Christine Keeler

Seán Bán Mac Grianna (1963)

*Ar a ghabháil go Sasain domh ar dtús
Is é a casadh domh na mílte cineadh
As an Fhrainc is as an Rúis
'Gus as gach dúiche ar fud na cruinne.*

When I first went to England
I met thousands of races
From France and from Russia
And from every region of the world

Loinneog:

*Aililiú puililiú, aililiú tá an poc ar buile
Aililiú puililiú, aililiú tá an poc ar buile.*

Refrain:

*Ailliú Puililiú, the billy goat is gone mad
Ailliú Puililiú, the billy goat is gone mad*

*Chuaigh mé isteach i dtigh an ósta
Is bhí na slóite a' déanamh grinn ann,
Cé casadh orm ach Stephen Ward
Is bhí sé rannpháirteach mar dhuine ann.*

I went into the pub
And there were crowds having fun there
Who should I meet but Stephen Ward
Who participated like everyone else.

*Thug mé spleáchadh fríd na mná
Agus bhí siad mánla maiseach gnaúil
Is go maíthe Dia domh mo chás
Thit mé i ngrá le Christine Keeler.*

I looked among the women
They were gracious, elegant and comely
And may God forgive me my case
I fell in love with Christine Keeler

*Chuir mé cogar ina cluais
Nuair a mheas mé go raibh sí súgach
Ach mo léan géar d'fhág sí mise i nguais
Is d'éalaigh sí le John Profumo.*

I whispered in her ear
When I thought her mellow
But alas she left me dismayed
And went off with John Profumo.

*Thug Stephen cuireadh domh chun tí
Agus chaith mé an oíche ansin gan chodladh
Ní raibh orm easpa bí ná dí
Is bhí spéirmhná caoine 'o mo mhealladh.*

*Bhí scáilí ann a mheall mo shúil
Nuair a bhí mé ag súgradh le mo ghrá geal
Ach ba mhaith an mhaise do mo rún é
D'éirigh sí agus bhris sí an scáthán.*

*Thug siad scainnir mhór don tír
Is d'fhág sin gléas éagcaoin ar lucht faille
Chuaigh an scéal go síor i mbéal na ndaoine
Is cé a bhí thíos leis ach Macmillan.*

*Dá maireadh sean-Anraí i réim
Bheadh aige harem aerach dathúil
Ní bheadh sé a' dréim le ceangal cléir'
Ach cead a fháil éaló leo fán raithneach.*

*Is iomaí spéirbhean álainn chaoin
A chaith seal oíche liom gan mhairg
Ach tá mé i ngrá le Christine Keeler
Agus beidh le saol na saol dá mairfinn.*

Stephen asked me to the house
And I spent the night with no sleep
I didn't want for food or drink
With refined beauties seducing me.

Reflections there seduced my eyes
As I played with my bright love
But to give my darling credit
Up she got and broke the mirror.

They gave the country great scandal
And an opportune moment for complaint
People talked incessantly of it
And Macmillan paid the price.

If old Henry still ruled
He'd have a cheerful, handsome harem
He'd not expect a cleric's tie
But permission to go off into the bracken.

Many's the beautiful, gentle woman
Who spent a happy night with me
But I'm in love with Christine Keeler
And so I'll be should I live forever.

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